

El Paso Times - November 16, 2009

By Chris Roberts

FORT BLISS -- Troops serving in combat zones soon will be required to sit down for a series of interviews with counselors trained to recognize post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal tendencies and other mental health problems.

Although no law can force a person to expose their inner struggles, officials said the program has the potential to save lives.

Estimated to cost \$45 million between 2010 and 2014, the idea was in a bill introduced earlier this year by U.S. Rep. Harry Teague, D-N.M., and signed into law about two weeks ago by President Barack Obama. Teague said the Defense Department has acknowledged its debt to combat veterans and agreed to finance the program.

"I think it's definitely ... providing care for the unseen wounds that some of our veterans bring back from their deployment," Teague said during a news conference earlier this week. "And we hope that relieves the stigma. By getting everybody in, we'll be able to help the ones who need it."

Teague dedicated the bill to Kyle Barthel, a soldier who deployed to Iraq with the 101st Airborne. Barthel committed suicide on July 22, 2007, at the age of 24.

Scott Krahling, now a Doña Ana County Commissioner, considered Barthel a friend. The night of his death, Barthel seemed all right, sharing a smoke with Krahling and borrowing a movie. In the weeks before that, however, Barthel had become increasingly emotional, swinging between aloof and needy, Krahling said. Barthel was consuming increasingly larger amounts of alcohol after giving up on counseling, which he had sought from Veterans Affairs.

"I think (the law) is a huge step in the right direction to make sure our active-duty soldiers are taken care of," Krahling said. "You can always go back and recognize the signals that were there after something like this happens."

Active-duty troops afraid of derailing careers or being branded as weak sometimes avoid asking for help. By posing the same questions to everyone, some of that stigma will be avoided, Teague said.

The law states that troops must have an interview within 60 days before deploying. Troops must be interviewed between 90 and 180 days after returning from combat zones. Three more interviews are to be conducted 6 months, 1 year and 2 years after deployment.

Teague said the later interviews should identify troops with delayed onset of symptoms, which has been common.

Soldiers already are required to take a written assessment designed to identify mental health problems between 90 and 100 days after returning from combat deployments, said Col. James Baunchalk, Beaumont Army Medical Center commander. The assessments are used to determine whether a soldier will be referred for counseling.

"Some of this we may already be accomplishing for some soldiers but it may not be for each and every soldier in terms of that face-to-face encounter," he said.

Guidelines for implementing the program must be finished by the Defense Department within six months, and a report on its implementation is due nine months after that, the law states. An exact structure and what it will cost locally cannot be determined until those guidelines are available, Baunchalk said.

Teague said Fort Bliss will face challenges implementing the program because of the constant stream of soldiers deploying overseas and its ongoing expansion. "They are going to have to

hire more people," he said.

Whether troops can be seen by physicians, psychiatrists or social workers has yet to be determined. The law simply says that someone "trained and certified to perform such assessments" must do the interviews.

The answer could have an impact on how quickly the program is implemented at Fort Bliss and how much it costs.

"Reality is (that) recruiting and retaining high quality health-care providers of all specialties is a challenge in the El Paso and southern New Mexico area," Baunchalk said. "If the pool is limited to just behavioral health professionals, that's a bigger challenge than if it's behavioral health professionals plus primary care providers like our family medicine doctors."

Combat veterans struggling with the scars of war still will have to make their own decisions.

"Ultimately it comes down to whether that soldier wants to share with someone what their issues and concerns are," Baunchalk said. "Our hope would be that every time we encounter a soldier ... they would feel comfortable enough (to say), 'Hey, I think I need some help.' "

Krahling, who lost his friend, said responsibility extends beyond the military.

"The families, the friends, the people who aren't soldiers need to be as aware of this as anybody else," he said. "Sometimes I think, if only I had known, maybe things would be much different today."